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LOVING YOUR CHRISTIAN
NATIONALIST NEIGHBOR

DISARMING

LEVIATHAN



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THE APOCALYPSE

Division, Desperation, and a New Calling

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I don't mean the end of the world, zombies, *Walking Dead*-type apocalypse. I mean 2020 was a season of unveiling, revealing what was previously hidden underneath the surface.

Like removing carpet.

In Phoenix, Arizona, where I live, many of the homes are built on a concrete foundation. As the home ages, the foundation shifts, inevitably creating fractures in the concrete. For those who have carpeted floors, these fractures often remain unseen. As the carpet decays, a homeowner will at some point remove it, exposing the cracked foundation underneath.

Admittedly, small fractures are no big deal. They happen all the time and are normal. But if the fracture is large enough, the homeowners are presented with a difficult decision. Do they choose to put down new carpet and ignore the fracture, or do they invest the time, resources, and care required to make the foundation whole again?

This decision is made even more intense when the homeowners realize that the house they live in will crumble to the ground if the fractured foundation is put under extreme pressure. The homeowners may be caught off guard at what they unintentionally discovered beneath the familiar and comfortable surface that once covered their home's floor.

They may even begin to regret removing the carpet, thinking that if they hadn't, they wouldn't have this problem. Which, as you know, is not true. They already had the problem. They just didn't realize it. Taking up the carpet did not create the fracture; it simply revealed it. The removal was an apocalypse—making what was once hidden plain to see.

Similarly, the events of 2020 were an apocalypse. The impeachment of Donald Trump, the Covid-19 pandemic and related government responses, the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd and subsequent public demonstrations, and the contentious presidential election (which culminated in an insurrection on January 6, 2021) exposed the profound depth of the fractures in our relationships. What started for many in 2015 as a general sense of concern or discontent exploded in 2020 to reveal divisions and disunity within their community.

Who among us has not experienced the impact of this in our relationships?

For years now people across the nation have been uprooting their entire lives—moving to different cities; changing employers, churches, and schools; leaving friends and family behind—all in an attempt to find communities that look, think, and vote like them.¹

Lifelong members of churches have moved their membership to congregations they believe more closely align with their political preferences. Many churches, including the one I serve, have experienced substantial division and relational loss. Decades-old relationships have been shattered over political and cultural views that erupted in 2020.

Even closer to home, many of us have experienced significant strain within our friendships and families. Members of our family who were once characterized by their kindness, good humor, and gentleness are now frequently displaying anxiety and outrage. The stuff that comes out of their mouths, well, sounds unloving and unhinged. How can we respond in a healthy way?

Perhaps that is why you are reading this. You feel hopeless. You want to engage your loved ones, but it seems like most of the conversations end in rage, name-calling, or estrangement.

You wonder what is causing so many of our loved ones to talk, think, and act in ways that are contrary to the way of Jesus while still assuming it is the “Christian way”?

MY NEW ENEMY

For me one of the most painful revelations of 2020 was that many within the American church were not placing their ultimate hope in Jesus but were instead buying the false promises of Christian nationalism—a movement that calls Christian followers to take government power at all costs to advance their preferred way of being in the world. For a few this term (and its eponymous movement) is not new. They have seen similar nationalistic movements rise in the past. But for the vast majority of us, including me, this was a newly discovered phenomenon. While it may seem novel, this great beast of Christian nationalism—which seeks to destroy dissidents, misappropriate Scripture for its purposes, and encourage acts of aggression, racism, and hatred—has been lurking in the shadows of the American church for years, spoken of in whispers behind closed doors. All of that notably changed in 2020 when the beast reemerged from the darkness.

Scripture often attributes such currents of evil to greater forces being at work in the world. These powers are often envisioned as a serpent, beast, or dragon—or sometimes, the Leviathan, an ancient mythical sea monster that lives in the disordered abyss (Job 3:8; 41:1; Psalm 74:14; 104:26; Isaiah 27:1). To the ancients Leviathan was a vivid symbol for cosmic chaos and the evil powers that oppose the loving, orderly ways of God.² They recognized that humans could choose to align with this dragon-like power to the point of becoming like dragons themselves. Leviathan captures both the material and spiritual reality of present-day American Christian nationalism.

But how did so many of our loved ones fall prey to this monstrous power? How could so many Jesus followers support such fearmongering, rage-inducing, Bible-distorting, arrogant, deceitful, dehumanizing behavior?

In the recent atmosphere of political and social upheaval, many of our neighbors found comfort in the promises of American Christian nationalist leaders; they began looking to them for guidance, hope, and

power. They were choosing to be shepherded not by spiritual leaders that look and act like Jesus but instead were being disciplined daily (sometimes hourly) by organizations that championed Christian nationalists and by media outlets that leveraged anxiety about Covid-19, demonstrations for racial justice, and a contested presidential race to incite viewers and expand their influence. These organizations then sold American Christian nationalism as a godly solution that would protect followers' faith, family, and, of course, firearms. And a multitude of evangelicals bought what they were selling, supporting organizations that propagate this false gospel with time, energy, and money.

As a pastor of a suburban nondenominational Bible church, I felt like I had a good handle on the political leanings of my fellow evangelicals. I assumed most (but not all) would continue to endorse candidates that supported politically conservative policies. However, I was shocked to discover just how many of them were happily giving full-throated support to the ungodly leaders and organizations promoting American Christian nationalism.

To be clear, my concern was not about some vague multitude of Americans. I was concerned about *my* people. *My* community. *My* church. *My* friends.

They seemed anxious and outraged, swept up in the chaos of the moment. Seeking security and peace, they began to embody the words of false prophets who claimed to be standing for Christ (but exhibited very little of his Spirit). These people that I loved, people I had known to be kind, caring, and compassionate, were boldly repeating hateful, rage-filled statements about immigrants, public school teachers, and government health officials at the church potluck. In hindsight I see that some of these behaviors had been developing for some time, but I had failed to grasp how deep the rot went.

It was heartbreaking to see so many people that I had shared Communion with for years align with this beastly power. Their lifestyles did not bear the marks of the way of Jesus. Their words, attitudes, and behavior were often brutal, demeaning, spiteful, proud, profane, mean-spirited, xenophobic, reckless, and vile.

I wondered how these beloved Christians could give allegiance to a movement that blatantly disregards the true ways of Jesus and instead embraces the power of Leviathan. It seems to me that they, like the first humans in the Garden of Eden, had been deceived into thinking that the way of the dragon is more powerful than the way of God.

It was in this apocalyptic season that I began to ask the Lord, “What should I do?”

FROM ENEMY COMBATANT TO MISSION FIELD

When I first encountered American Christian nationalism, I viewed it as a heresy to be destroyed and those who gave themselves over to it as enemies to defeat. I thought that I could use the Bible to contradict their arguments and then they’d see that the ideas, perspectives, and methods they were promoting were contrary to the teachings of Scripture. In my mind my powerful arguments would lead them to repent and return to the ways of Jesus.

My intentions were good. My methods, not so much.

By viewing American Christian nationalists as the enemy, I was taking the posture of Leviathan: a combative approach that created more divisiveness and frustration. This was the wrong mindset, but I didn’t know it yet. Then, I had a mind-renewing, life-altering experience (what the Bible calls *metanoia* or “repentance”), which changed my approach and set me on the path to writing this book.

One of my favorite questions comes from a podcast called *Make Me Smart*. In each episode they ask their guests, “What is something that you used to believe that it turned out later you were wrong about?” I love that question because it assumes that we can change our beliefs, even on deeply held convictions. The Bible calls this the “renewing of our minds.” The apostle Paul, writing to the Roman church, says, “Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the *renewing of your mind*. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2, emphasis added).

I’ve had many mind-renewing experiences and pray for many more, by God’s grace. The one that changed my trajectory came at the end of

a very difficult season in my life. For much of 2020 I received numerous emails, texts, and phone calls from people I had served for years, accusing me of promoting ungodly attitudes and teachings. I was told I had adopted a Luciferian spirit of fear by advocating for online services during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. I was accused of spreading divisive and demonic teachings such as critical race theory when we encouraged people to study the history of racism in the American church.³ Some even shared that they believed I was aligning with the antichrist by not publicly calling our church to vote for their preferred presidential candidate.

This was especially painful for me because I had not intended to make enemies of the people that I served. By the time we entered the new year, I was exhausted, hurt, and frankly ready to quit my vocation as a pastor. This was the most challenging time of my life to date. But thanks to the tremendous support of our church leadership I was able to hang on. They were exceptionally encouraging and gracious to me and my family. Recognizing that I was wounded, they encouraged me to take an extended sabbatical to rest and heal.

During this time away, I spent a full day walking through various parks and reflecting on the relationships that I held dear that were now fractured. As I strolled through the beautiful landscape, different people would come to mind, and I would write their names down in a journal. At the end of the day I found my favorite bench that sits in a secluded spot overlooking a quiet stream.

As I sat, I began to count the entries. To my surprise, I counted over three hundred names.

Three hundred!

Three hundred broken relationships came to my mind in one day.

The pain in my guts was overwhelming.

Perhaps you know this pain. You may even have your own running list of broken relationships.

As I worked through the pages of this sad journal, I realized that many of these relationships fractured under the weight of disagreements relating to American Christian nationalism.

The pain in me continued to grow.

I had not set out to turn my friends into enemies, and yet the pages of my journal testified to the divisive nature of this current moment. I spent the remainder of the day grieving the collective loss of relationships that were so precious to me.

Though I continue to hold out hope that Jesus will bring reconciliation, many of these broken relationships haunt me. Standing against Christian nationalism in today's American evangelical church is costly. If you are reading this book, you probably know this already.

That day a flood of emotions washed over me. I felt betrayed, misunderstood, and angry. Really angry. And not the righteous kind of anger, either (though at the time, I thought it was). No, what I felt was rage.

In the days that followed my sabbatical I vowed to fight Christian nationalism in my community. I began to formulate a plan of attack. How could I defeat this great beast? What methods of warfare could I choose to take on this enemy? I was itching for a fight.

I started researching organizations that platform American Christian nationalist leaders and their ideas. I read everything I could get my hands on that explained or exposed nationalism in the American church.

Then I got a message from an employee of Turning Point USA (TPUSA). TPUSA is a conservative student organization that has exploded into a multi-million-dollar movement producing large rallies and conferences around the country as well as dozens of social media channels and radio programs.⁴ They were reaching out to local pastors to promote their new "Biblical Citizenship" classes. They were hoping that I, a pastor, would host one of the classes and invite our church and the broader community to participate. I decided to take the meeting.

As I walked into the appointment, I was thinking about which issues I might want to argue about. I assumed my counterpart would be a rage-fueled and easily offended bully. I was wrong.

The person who entered the room was not as I imagined. She was a young woman, full of energy. She treated me with hospitality and was

kind in her speech. She was, dare I say, joyful. At least more joyful than I was at the moment.

As we talked, she presented the curriculum and highlighted the set of issues it addressed. She said things that sounded strange to me, like, “Pastor Caleb, this curriculum helps people know that we need to stand up for what the Bible says about school choice,” and “We need to stand for what the Bible says about our God-given right to bear arms.”

Now was my opportunity to strike. We were talking about the Bible, my field of expertise. I was ready to combat these misinformed ideas. I was ready to go to war.

Then something unexpected happened that changed the course of my life.

In a candid moment, my counterpart said, “Politics is really important, but at the end of the day, I really just want to follow Jesus.”

My heart melted.

In that moment the Holy Spirit did a work on me. I sensed the Spirit say, “Caleb, this person doesn’t need your theological attacks. She needs to be graciously reached with the good news of the kingdom of God.”

Instead of advancing my arguments, I said, “Tell me about how you met Jesus.”

She responded, “Last year at a Turning Point USA event.”

In front of me was a woman who genuinely wanted to follow Jesus but had been disciplined into a distorted way of thinking about him, Scripture, and what it means to live the kingdom of God now.

I realized in that moment that this woman and the multitude of others influenced by American Christian nationalism were not an enemy to attack. They were a mission field to reach.

The days and weeks that followed were a time of profound reflection and recalibration for me. I dropped the posture of a warrior and began to ask God what it would look like for me to take the posture of a missionary instead, seeking not to defeat or destroy but to hospitably, lovingly, gently seek their restoration and call them back to the way of Jesus.

I set out to be a missionary to American Christian nationalists.

DIVING INTO THE CHAOTIC WATERS

With this newfound calling I dove headfirst into the chaotic waters of American Christian nationalism. Most of the missionaries I know have been called to reach cultures different from their own; they are sometimes referred to as crosscultural missionaries. They invest a lot of time, energy, and resources learning about the communities they are called to engage with. It would be similar for me. While I was acquainted with some of the elements of American Christian nationalism, I knew that I'd need to adopt the perspective of a student and learn more about my mission field.

I signed up for dozens of newsletters, chatted in discussion groups, participated in local rallies, engaged in “biblical citizenship” coaching calls on Zoom, hung out at “patriot pastors” meetings, and even attended the first annual TPUSA Faith Pastors Summit.

I examined the movement up close in the communities near me that adhere to it. I got to know the people, what they believe, what they care about (much of which I resonate with), and why they participate in events and organizations that promote American Christian nationalism.

While I have benefited greatly from work done by scholars that help to explain the phenomenon of Christian nationalism in America, it was important to me to meet the people face-to-face as much as possible. As one missionary said to me, “If you really want to see what people believe, look at their lived experience.”

I wanted to listen to their voices and look in their eyes as they shared their hearts with me. American Christian nationalists are like every other mission field. They have values, rituals, taboos, and deep stories. To reach them I had to engage with those elements of their culture.

I discovered that American Christian nationalism is not monolithic. It is a movement composed of an interwoven network of various organizations, each with its own theological, cultural, and political commitments. It is composed of a variety of church traditions, including Pentecostals, Catholics, Presbyterians, and Baptists. They live in rural, suburban, and urban communities. Participants have varied degrees of involvement, ranging from sharing videos on social media to funneling

financial support to purchasing weapons for what they believe is an impending uprising. Within these circles I've found true believers, new converts, violent zealots, and disaffected grifters. The one thing they all had in common is that they are not placing their ultimate faith, hope, and allegiance in Jesus and following the way of the cross. Instead, they are united in placing their trust in the power of the sword.

JOIN ME IN REACHING THIS MISSION FIELD

Many of us who recognize American Christian nationalism as incompatible with the way of Jesus are feeling deep grief at the fractures within our communities. How do we move forward? How do we heal the broken relationships with our friends and family? How do we heal the fractures within the church?

I believe that we can approach American Christian nationalists as a mission field using the two-thousand-year-old methods of Jesus and his earliest followers.

Like many modern cult leaders, those propagating American Christian nationalism strategically use biblical lingo and misrepresent Scripture in such a way that most of their followers accept their beliefs to be genuinely Christian. But at its core American Christian nationalism is a false gospel, a leader-driven movement seeking power and influence by indoctrinating its followers, preying on their fear, and leveraging their religious devotion. Those who believe it need to be reached with the true gospel, using the methods of Jesus.⁵

Each of us can take the role of a loving missionary, leading with hospitality, practicing the fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), engaging in humbly subversive conversations, and inviting our American Christian nationalist loved ones to turn back to Jesus.

The purpose of this book is to equip you to love your American Christian nationalist neighbors by reaching them with the hope-filled message of the kingdom of God. In the following pages you will better understand American Christian nationalism, discover why people are buying into it, prepare yourself to engage them in healthy ways, and learn how to facilitate conversations that point to Jesus.

In this age of outrage it can be easy to dismiss or hate American Christian nationalists, but there is a better way. As you read this book, I invite you to prayerfully consider how to use these tools to bless your mission field and show them the love of Jesus.

Though this current season may seem hopeless, I encourage you to rest in the power of Jesus. He has risen from the grave, conquering evil and death, and he is faithful to deliver and restore all who turn to him.

Our role as missionaries to American Christian nationalists is simply to point them back to Jesus, who loves them and you very much.

BOOK ROADMAP

Once I discovered this new perspective of being a missionary to American Christian nationalists, I realized I needed to learn how to be a missionary! So I reached out to the missionaries I knew and interviewed them, asking them to share their wisdom. One missionary who had served for five decades shared three key components to missional engagement: study, set, and show.

- ▶ **Study the culture.** Invest time and energy seeking to understand their values, worldviews, beliefs, rituals, taboos, founding myths, and dreams. Examine the spiritual nature of their community, looking at religious practices, dogma, and the spiritual currents that run contrary to the gospel. Then discern how their values and convictions might fail to produce the good things that they long for. This will be the focus of chapters two through four.
- ▶ **Set the table.** Model a better way by living a life they admire and invite them to join you by leading with hospitality and cultivating a healthy relationship with your mission field, yourself, and God. This will be the focus of chapters five and six.
- ▶ **Show the inconsistencies.** Use humbly subversive questions to help them discover that their current convictions and values are inconsistent and that only the gospel of Jesus will produce the flourishing they desire. This will be the focus of chapter seven.

In the sections to follow I aim to show how you can love your American Christian nationalist neighbors by learning their culture, engaging in heart-level conversations, and guiding them toward humbly subversive conversations. All of this is done in the hope that they would have a *metanoia* experience of their own and turn back to the way of Jesus.

Before we continue, I want to give a brief caution. The road ahead will be long and difficult. American Christian nationalism will not be disarmed quickly. It will take thousands of conversations at kitchen counters, café tables, and small group gatherings. Many of the people we will encounter will exhibit dismissive, combative, or belligerent attitudes toward us. The seductive power of American Christian nationalism can consume those who give themselves over to it. The methods listed below are not guaranteed to bring about redemptive transformation. Only the living God can do that. Even now as you read, I invite you to pray that the Spirit of God will give you strength and guidance as you set out on this journey.

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